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ABSTRACT

To improve student performance, educators have recently adopted non-traditional classroom practices. Yet, as media reports and some research indicate, parents may favor traditional practices. A descriptive case study examined the beliefs of a representative sample of 25 parents of students in grade 11 who studied English in a heterogeneously-grouped American Studies course in a small high school in Southern Maine. Findings suggest that parents' beliefs may not be as traditional as many educators may think and that differences are not always related to social and economic class or educational background. Yet because beliefs are complex and not often explored, parents' expressed preferences or opposition to certain classroom practices can be easily misunderstood. This paper discusses some aspects of these beliefs to show why educators should involve parents in the process of changing instructional practices. Contains 30 references and 2 tables of data. (Author/RS)

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PARENTS' BELIEFS:

THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

THAT UNDERLIE THE PRACTICES THEY PREFER

FOR THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Paper presented at

the American Educational Research Association

Chicago, Illinois

Symposium: "What Is the Likely Impact of Parental Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge on Changing Instructional Practices in the Secondary School"

March 27, 1997

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Abstract

To improve student performance, educators have recently adopted non-traditional classroom practices. Yet, as media reports and some research indicate, parents may favor traditional practices. This study suggests that parents' beliefs may not be as traditional as many educators may think and that differences are not always related to social and economic class or educational background. Yet because beliefs are complex and not often explored, parents' expressed preferences or opposition to certain classroom practices can be easily misunderstood. This paper will discuss some aspects of these beliefs to show why educators should involve parents in the process of changing instructional practices.

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Because parents are important stakeholders whose support for school change is essential (Sarason 1982; Fullan 1982, 1991), educators engaged in efforts to restructure the high school classroom are faced with the dual challenge of finding ways to involve parents in the change process and to develop their support for and understanding of innovative classroom practices. These tasks may be particularly difficult at the high school level because parents are less likely to be involved with high schools than with elementary schools. Moreover, although few studies have been conducted with parents of secondary students, the research indicates that parents generally favor traditional classroom practices. Wilhite (1973), for example, reports that parents are likely to be a barrier to change because they tend to disapprove of "educational practices different from those they experienced in school" (228). The authors of a recent Public Agenda study report that there is "widespread discomfort with new teaching methods," such as "allowing students to use calculators in math class, teaching writing without emphasizing spelling and grammar, and the practice of mixing students of different abilities in the same class (Johnson and Immerwahr 1994, 17).

Many of the innovative classroom practices currently being adopted are quite different from those parents may have experienced; they may not understand or support them. Studies which show that parents tend to favor traditional practices have usually focused on parents' preferences; they have not looked at the explanations given for these preferences in terms of the assumptions about learning and teaching that underlie the practices they prefer. Yet the beliefs parents hold about effective classroom practice constitute the lens through which they see, interpret, and evaluate the teaching-learning process as their children experience it in school. Even though these beliefs are likely to play a central role in their responses to changes in their children's classroom, educators rarely involve parents in the planning process. Thus, it is not surprising that the implementation of new practices sometimes leads to criticism and conflict, as has been seen, for example, in the whole language-phonics debate at the elementary school level.

As high school English teachers shift away from teacher-centered classroom practices and attempt to engage students more actively in their own learning, they may have to help parents learn "to think differently about their children's learning." (Sizer 1992, 4). Yet we know very little about parents' present perspectives on teaching and learning because they have rarely been asked (Fullan 1982). Thus, the purpose of my study was to find out how one group of parents thought their children could best learn in a high school English class. This paper will focus primarily on one aspect of the larger study, the assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning underlying the classroom practices parents preferred and opposed.

This study suggests that parents' beliefs may not be as traditional as many educators may think and that differences in beliefs are not always related to social and economic class or educational background. Yet because beliefs are complex, idiosyncratic, and not open to examination, their relationship to parents' expressed preferences or opposition to certain classroom practices can be easily

misunderstood. In this paper I will discuss some aspects of parents' beliefs to show why educators should involve parents in the process of changing instructional practices.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this descriptive case study (Patton 1980) was to present basic information about parents' beliefs, but, following procedures recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory research, I also analyzed and interpreted the data in order to develop a theoretical framework for understanding parents' beliefs about effective classroom practices.

The literature reviewed to provide a context for the study suggests that educators are likely to be more successful in implementing the innovative practices if there is a congruence between their beliefs and parents' beliefs (Schlechty 1990; Barth 1990; Lieberman 1991; and others). Efforts to involve parents in the change process are essential, but attempts to include parents may also be problematical because of differences in family members' and family characteristics. Because of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, some parents are likely to be more resistant to be involved and also less likely to support any attempt by educators to institute progressive practices (Young and McGeeney 1968; Lightfoot 1973; Johnson and Ransom 1983; Anyon 1980; and other more recent studies conducted with specific populations).

For this study parents were asked how they thought their children could best learn in a high school English class. One goal was to obtain a better understanding of parents' beliefs about effective classroom practices for teaching and learning high school English—chosen because it is one of the central disciplines in the high school curriculum, a required course for all students, and a focus of current restructuring efforts. Moreover, since knowing something about the basis of parents' preferences might hold the key for understanding innovative practices, a second goal was to determine the explanations they give to support them. A third goal—the focus of this paper—was to examine the assumptions, or general principles of teaching and learning, that appeared to underlie their preferred practices.

Undertaking a study to investigate beliefs was challenging because beliefs are not open to examination in the way that knowledge systems are (Nespor 1987). Individuals themselves are often not aware of the unarticulated assumptions which guide their actions and decisions (Abelson 1979; Nespor 1987; Rokeach 1960, 1968; Pajares 1992; and others). Yet Fullan (1982) argues that understanding people's beliefs is "*a necessary pre-condition for engaging in any change effort with them*" (120. Emphasis in the original). Rokeach (1968) maintains that it is necessary to conduct studies of beliefs and it is appropriate to use a rating system, as I did, to examine variations in people's beliefs.

Beliefs, as defined for this study, was comprised of the classroom practices parents preferred because they would best help their children learn, the explanations they gave to support their preference for or opposition to specific practices, and the assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that appeared to underlie their preferred practices. These aspects were framed as three research questions I attempted to answer.

I interviewed 25 parents of students in grade 11 who studied English in a heterogeneously-grouped American Studies course in a small high school in Southern Maine. Eastland, a pseudonym for a small coastal town, had a population of just under 7000, mostly white. At one time many of its citizens worked in factories, but the character of the town had changed in recent years as most of these factories closed. Although Eastland was still home to some people who could be classified as working-class, it also served as a bedroom community for many professionals, who worked in a nearby city. According to the 1990 U.S. Census data, of the people 25 years and older, 14.5% reported not having graduated from high school, 85.5% were high school graduates, and 32.2% had graduated from college.

American Studies was a required course for all grade 11 students at Eastland High School (260 students, grades 9-12). Over the years the history teacher and the English teacher had worked together to teach the course and had integrated history and English to the point where students were given a combined syllabus. The teachers used the two-period time block quite flexibly. All students in the course covered the same basic material, and the assignments usually required them to integrate English with history. Students who would find some of the assignments too challenging were sometimes given different ones or asked to do them in a different way. The emphasis in the course for all students, however, was on developing critical reading, writing, and thinking skills, and the work overall, quite demanding. According to an article in the newspaper about students enrolled in summer school because they failed the course, American Studies was known as a "killer course."

Participants were selected randomly from a categorized (with the help of the guidance counselor) list of all students enrolled in grade 11. The sample represented the full range of parents in the population (parents of grade 11 students) with regard to educational background and social-economic status. One interview lasting an average of one hour and 5-15 minutes was conducted with each parent. Follow-up phone calls were made in some instances.

The interviews were conducted in their homes or, in two cases, at other sites parents chose. I began by showing them nine photocopied photographs of different classrooms, such as one with a teacher in front of class and another of students in small groups, and asked them which photos looked like classes in which their children would be likely to learn (or not learn) English and why. Then they were asked what content should be included in English and how students could best learn. After they had described the ideal English class (focusing usually on reading/literature and writing), they were asked how much they thought their children's present class was like the ideal class they had just described

Data were analyzed in three phases. The first phase was primarily descriptive and provided a basis for later examining the data at a more abstract level. I first summarized the practices parents preferred and the explanations they gave. The explanations were further analyzed to determine the likely basis for and the criteria parents used to evaluate the practices they preferred. Then, to determine the assumptions underlying preferred practices, I used six dilemmas about teaching and learning from a list developed by Berlak and Berlak (1981) to develop a framework for rating parents' positions on the dilemmas. These results were used to construct a portrait of the beliefs of parents as a group.

Placeholder profiles marking four positions on a continuum showed how parents' beliefs differed when they were positioned relative to one another.

Of the three major limitations of this study, the fact that the data were collected entirely from interviews probably had the greatest effect on the results. Only one interview was conducted with each parent, and the interviews varied. Moreover, as Rokeach (1960, 1968) and others note, people cannot express all that they believe because some beliefs are buried below the level of their awareness. As in any qualitative study, the researcher's social position and personal beliefs also influenced both the data collection and analysis (Mishler 1986). Several procedures, including the use of peer reviewers, were followed to minimize the effects of researcher bias and to make the study as valid and reliable as possible. Finally, this study was limited by the small number of parents included although the parents of 38.7% of the students in grade 11 were interviewed. The participants, ranging from a parent who dropped out of school in 4th grade to one with two advanced degrees, quite fairly represented the full range of parents of 11th grade students in this school but not of parents in the community as a whole. Parents with college degrees were under-represented in my sample—perhaps because a number of Eastland parents traditionally have sent children of high school age to private schools. The results, which describe some aspects of the educational beliefs of this group of parents only, may or may not be representative of the beliefs of other parents in Eastland or parents in general.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Analysis of parents' explanations revealed that, when these parents explained their preferences for certain practices, they talked about themselves, about students, and about school as preparation for life. Their responses suggested that parents viewed a practice as favorable to the extent they believed it was likely 1. to capture students' interest or engage them, 2. to address their needs and personal characteristics, 3. to have real-world relevance, and/or 4. to preserve a tradition. Parents sometimes used a combination of these criteria in one explanation: the categories are interrelated rather than exclusive. All parents used the first three criteria at some point, but only a few said a practice was good because "that's the way we did it."

Differences in their interpretation and application of the criteria seemed to be related to three factors: the degree to which parents perceived students as having universal or particular characteristics, the amount of knowledge they possessed about different practices, and the dominant time perspective they adopted in their interviews. These factors also help explain why, even though they used the same criteria to evaluate practices, some parents were more likely than others to differentiate curriculum or methods for particular groups or individual students, to cite a greater variety of preferred practices, and to describe these practices in greater detail than other parents did. As this paper will show, these factors help explain differences in parents' assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning.

The Process of Rating Individual Parents' Positions on the Dilemmas

To look at the assumptions about teaching and learning that underlie the practices parents preferred and create and name four placeholder categories, I used a framework provided by Berlak and

Berlak (1981) to rate parents on the basis of the positions they appear to take on six dilemmas about curriculum and classroom practice:

Teacher control vs. Child control
Knowledge as content vs. Knowledge as process
Learning is molecular vs. Learning is holistic
Children have shared characteristics vs. Each child is unique
Learning is individual vs. Learning is social
Differential allocation of resources vs. Equal allocation of resources

Because parents' positions can be looked at as points on a continuum, I first rated their responses for each dilemma. Then I combined these individual ratings to get a single rating for each parent in order to sketch a portrait of the beliefs of parents as a group. These single ratings were the basis for my positioning parents at various points along the continuum, for determining the four placeholder categories, and for deciding which category most closely represented parents' conceptions of the nature of teaching and learning. There is the possibility of distorting the data when several ratings are combined to get one overall rating, but the single ratings in each case here quite fairly represented the individual dilemma ratings because, as I explain later, I did not include one of the dilemmas in the final total.

Parents' ratings on each dilemma were based partly on a holistic assessment of the entire interview--the weight of all their responses taken together--as well as their positions on several factors chosen as relevant criteria for evaluating each of the dilemmas. For example, the degree of choice parents said students should have regarding the topics they wrote about was used as one indication of their positions on the Teacher vs. Student Control dilemma. Since the greatest number of parents (44%) said students should choose 50% of these topics, I used that figure as one factor to establish a mid-point rating on the continuum for the control dilemma. Because I chose to describe the mid-point on the basis of the views of the greatest number of parents on each factor, the group totals for each dilemma also clustered around the middle.

After listing some general factors to be considered for evaluating positions on each dilemma, I again read each interview transcript in its entirety and completed a summary sheet of the relevant preferred practices and explanations for each parent before attempting to rate their positions. Thus, both the overall flavor and weight of their general comments as well as their specific answers to individual questions were taken into account. Parent responses which fit squarely in the middle were rated zero. As the responses appeared to reflect positions away from the middle, they were given scores of -1, -2, +1, or +2. Every effort—including the use of feedback from peer reviewers—was made to fairly assess each parent's responses in relation to those of the other parents and in keeping with the criteria established for the midpoint on the continuum.

As the Table 1 shows, when parents' responses were analyzed and rated, a majority appeared to believe, though in varying degrees, in the following general principles: 1. Teachers should share control with students. 2. Knowledge is more process than content. 3. Learning is a holistic and integrated process--the whole counts for more than the parts. 4. Children have unique characteristics that teachers

need to address. 5. Learning is more a social process than an individual one. 6. Resources--at least in terms of grouping students--should be allocated equally rather than differentially: students can learn best in heterogeneously-grouped classes as long as teachers address the needs of students who learn more quickly or more slowly than others.

Table 1 **Parents' Ratings on Individual Dilemmas** (n = 25)

	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	
Teacher Control	0	7	12	5	1	**Student Control**
Knowledge as Content	1	1	11	11	1	**Knowledge as Process**
Learning is Molecular	0	1	11	12	1	**Learning is Holistic**
Children have Shared Characteristic	0	2	6	15	2	**Each Child is Unique**
Learning is Individual	0	3	11	6	5	**Learning is Social**
Differential Allocation Resources	2	6	3	14	N/A	**Equal Allocation Resources**
TOTALS	3 (2%)	20 (13%)	54 (36%)	63 (42%)	10 (7%)	

Even though most differences among parents were in degree rather than in kind, there were two issues about which they expressed a clear difference of opinion: whether students should be heterogeneously- or homogeneously-grouped and the value of English as an interdisciplinary course. Heterogeneous grouping was favored by 56% while 28% preferred homogeneous grouping. The others gave mixed responses to this question. 48% favored combining the study of English with history, 16% were opposed to this practice, and 36% were unsure.

Because some previous studies indicate that gender might be a factor, I charted parents' ratings by gender. However, because participants were not evenly represented (9 males, 16 females) and few differences were noted, it is not possible without a more in-depth analysis to say whether or not gender was a factor. Differences were noted on two dilemmas. Females were more likely than males to lean towards more teacher control. Six females (37.5%) earned a rating of -1 while only one male did. All others were rated zero or higher. Females were also slightly more likely than males to view children as unique. Of the females 75% had ratings higher than zero while only 66% of the males did. Ratings in other categories were quite similar.

Except for the two dilemmas on which there were slight differences in the positions of males and females, I could find no other basis, such as socio-economic status, educational background, students' present level of achievement in English, students' plans after high school, or parents' current involvement with Eastland High School, which might suggest a basis for differences in parents' beliefs. It is important to note, though, that this was a small sample, and, because many professional parents in Eastland had chosen to send their children to private school before grade 11, this sample included fewer parents in this category than would be the case with a sample of parents whose children attended Eastland elementary schools.

Positions on the Assumptions: Portrait of Parents as a Group

Ratings on the first five dilemmas were added to get a single rating which characterized parents' overall beliefs relative to the beliefs of other parents in this group. Those totals were used to position parents on a "beliefs continuum." These total ratings, however, did not include the last dilemma (allocation of resources) for several reasons. Parents' responses to my question about grouping were the sole basis used to determine this rating, and the question was asked separately. With very few exceptions, parents did not mention grouping at all in their discussions of the ideal English classes. In several cases its inclusion in the single beliefs rating would have resulted in a distorted picture of some parents' overall positions on the dilemmas as they reflected the kind of day-to-day activities and assignments they believed would be most effective for learning English. The overall beliefs ratings (ranging from -3 to +9) shown in Table 2, then, represent the assumptions, or general principles of learning and teaching, underlying the practices parents believed would best help students learn once they were in a classroom without regard to whether students in the class had been heterogeneously or homogeneously grouped.

Table 2 **Placeholders on the Continuum***

Teacher-Directed Structured Learning	**Teacher-Monitored Interactive Learning**	**Interactive Individualized Integrated Learning**	**Personalized Interdisciplinary Learning in Classroom and Community**
Lucille Farnum	Judy Jones	Pat Wilson	Randall Cromwell
Parents' Total Ratings on First Five Dilemmas (n = 25)			
-3 -2 -1 2 1 1	0 +1 +2 2 3 5	+3 +4 +5 4 3 3	+6 +7 +8 +9 0 0 0 1
4 parents (16%)	10 parents (40%)	10 parents (40%)	1 parent (4%)

*The names of all parents are pseudonyms.

The percentage of parents listed in each category is intended only as a rough approximation of their views since there is a great deal of overlap. For the most part, the individual ratings did not reflect differences in the kind of practices parents favored but rather the extent to which they believed certain curriculum should be included or emphasized, that teachers should use certain methods, or that

curriculum and methods should be differentiated to suit the needs and interests of particular groups or individual students. Parents, for example, said that it was good for students to work together in small groups, but while some thought this should be done only once in a while, others would favor it as a practice more than half of all the time students were in class. There was no teaching method that any parent said should never be used whereas some did say they were opposed to certain curriculum (the classics, for example), the idea of English being taught as an interdisciplinary course, and heterogeneous grouping.

On one end of the continuum, parents described the ideal classroom as one in which students could learn best if the teacher directed most of the activities and children spent most of their time working individually or as a whole class. Students would have limited opportunities for choosing books to read or topics for writing and would work with other students in small groups only once in while. Although these parents did not advocate a return to the good old days, their conceptualization of teaching and learning was closer to the traditional classroom than those of others.

As one moves from this end of the continuum toward the other end, parents held increasingly differentiated views of the learning process. They advocated giving students more choices and more time to work together with the teacher monitoring rather than closely directing their activities. The classroom would become a much more interactive environment.

Farther over on the continuum parents began to express a more holistic and integrated view of learning. Students would learn skills in context, and knowledge about American literature would be enhanced by studying American history at the same time. Variety in activities and choice of assignments would not only be good for changing the routine to keep students interested but would also be necessary because students do not all have the same needs, interests, and learning styles.

Four Placeholder Profiles

The four parents whose profiles follow were selected to mark four points on the continuum around which other parents with similar ratings cluster. Although I have included some background information on each parent to provide some context for their comments, I do not intend to suggest any relationship between placement on the continuum and parents' socioeconomic status or educational backgrounds because for this group of parents there appeared to be no relationship.

Placeholder 1 - Teacher-Directed Structured Learning

The teacher has to have some input into everything they do, but I don't think she should stand over them and nag them. – Lucille Farnum

Lucille Farnum, a married homemaker and mother of two children, was a high school graduate. Her husband also completed 12th grade and worked as a warehouse manager. Norman, a junior at Eastland High, had no plans after graduation. His school achievement was generally "poor" although his mother said it was "fair" in English. Norman had cerebral palsy and was scheduled for a "structured study hall" with the special education teacher. Learning and teaching, as she described it, was very much like what one would find in a traditional classroom.

She viewed learning primarily as a process of transmission which required memorization and practice. Slow to select a photo of a class she favored for her son, she finally pointed to one with students in a small group with the teacher and said: "I like the small group. One on one. Norman seems to absorb more." The photo of the teacher at the blackboard was "okay," but "kids are going to be really bored. Maybe they do absorb more than I think they do." The best way to learn vocabulary was "[m]emorization. Like we used to be given so many words per week, learned them and then had a test on them and did them over if we got them wrong." She did say that discussion with the whole class about a book would be good "if you got to one point you didn't understand.... It might help if you get [those parts] out in the open and everybody's discussing them."

Students needed fairly close teacher supervision and direction and structured assignments. The teacher, she said, "has to have some input into everything they do, but I don't think she should stand over them and nag them." She liked the idea that her son had a "structured" study hall and recommended "quizzes" on "certain chapters" of a book to "make sure kids read that chapter." Students in small groups were likely to "just sit and discuss who's going with whom." Thus, even though she said small-group discussion "actually helps in some cases...even without the teacher" because "they can figure it out on their own," she also said students should work "mostly by themselves" and have "one group thing a month...." Lucille Famum appeared to favor what might be called controlled choice: "It's probably best [for the teacher to assign topics for writing]. I mean the teacher would say do an essay on a person and he'd choose which one." She recommended choosing books from a booklist: "They could pick out the areas they liked." Unlike other parents with similar ratings, Lucille did not specifically mention the need for classroom rules, but her comments suggested that she believed a structured classroom environment was best.

She emphasized the need for students to learn "the basics"--reading, writing, grammar, and spelling: "I don't think the school spends enough time on English grammar.... [Grammar is important] because if he ever got a business job where he had to speak to people, he could make them understand what he has to say." Lucille did not believe that was being done and blamed the elementary school for "a senior in high school who can barely read." She thought that students could best learn vocabulary words and punctuation rules in isolation, such as by doing exercises or memorizing lists teachers give them: "Spelling lists get the point across. Again it's the memorization."

While she thought students could benefit from writing drafts because the teacher could "write little notes all over it," she did not think other students would be of much help. Her son's friends "could care less" about school and "if he could go to a student who has all A's, he'd feel inadequate." Process with regard to writing was less important than product: "I don't see that it would make a difference as long as they got to the point of the right way or right answer." She expressed concern about teachers discouraging students by not praising them when they had made an effort or by returning a paper which "has nothing but red ink all over it." Even though she did not think every paper needed to be graded, "teachers should look at all [written work] and make some comments." When asked if students could

evaluate their own work, she said: "If I had to grade myself, I'd give myself a better grade than I deserved. I think it's the teacher's duty [to evaluate]."

What students learn should be connected to real life and their future plans. She did not think everyone needed algebra or Shakespeare: "If kids aren't interested, they're not going to do it. What good is it later on? The school system doesn't seem to realize that not all kids are going to college....I think they need to teach kids about life....They don't have the common sense about basic everyday things like doing laundry and cooking meals." When they read a book, it would help to "put it in perspective as to what's happening now...."

Like all other parents, Lucille Farnum believed that students learned best when they were interested and engaged. Her profile serves as a placeholder for one end of the continuum because her overall view can best be characterized as *Teacher-Directed Structured Learning*. In the next profile Judy Jones described practices which would be less tightly controlled by the teacher and more interactive than those cited by Lucille Farnum.

Placeholder 2 - Teacher-Monitored Interactive Learning

I just think the groups of kids and being able to express their ideas between each other is very important, but having the teacher there to kind of keep it together. – Judy Jones

Judy Jones, a single parent, graduated from Eastland High in 1973 and worked as a customer service rep for Medicare. She said her daughter Danielle, a junior, did "fair" in school and "good" in English and planned to attend college to study criminology. She viewed learning as a more interactive process than Lucille Farnum described.

Structure in the classroom was important, but students could work by themselves. Teachers should monitor what students are doing and encourage them, but they did not always need direct and close supervision. For example, the first photo she selected showed a small group of students with a teacher: "I like this. I think it gives kids a chance to exchange ideas and get new ideas. They're coming up with them on their own yet the teacher is there--to stop in every once in a while. I don't think that it would be as productive [without the teacher]. I think it gives too much to be able to wander, get off the track of what they're there for.... [Looking at the photo with the couch in the classroom corner] I think there should be some sort of structure. I wouldn't be upset about it..., but you're not at home....If you're sitting on the chair, you're going to have to concentrate on the things that are going to help you more when you get out in the business world....[Referring to the photo of students outdoors]....I wouldn't want it all the time, but sometimes changing your environment even for a short amount of time, it helps."

While she believed "the basics" were important, they should not be the main emphasis.

> [In English students should learn] grammar, proper speaking, the use of words. Like you don't say like *ain't*.... [Learning the parts of speech and diagramming sentences is important because] it's a major means of expressing yourself, getting your point across to people and in some cases the only way to get your point across. Such as information that

> you want to get, and you perhaps can't have any phone contact so it all has to be done in written form. Also writing....punctuation, sentence structure, the basics....The basics to me are spelling and reading, you know, being able to read, comprehending what you read.

Students, however, could learn skills both in context and in isolation. When students first learned rules, it would help to do exercises, but they could best learn by correcting errors in their own writing. When asked the best way to learn mechanics, worksheets or correcting their own writing, she replied: " Probably the second, having to correct what you've done--I think the first part is important at the beginning to learn the basics and then the only way to learn them better is to work with them and to apply them to what you are doing." [Other parents with similar ratings sometimes suggested that it was best to combine exercises with correction of their own writing.] Vocabulary, she said, was best learned by looking words up: "I'm a firm believer in using the dictionary."

Even though her views on mechanics and vocabulary suggested a more holistic idea of learning than Lucille Farnum, Judy Jones did not favor teaching English and history together. [Other parents with similar ratings either felt the same way or expressed uncertainty about this issue.] Judy said: "I think history is one thing and English is another....I think they should be made aware of how they tie in together, but I think they should be separate. You really lose what each thing is."

She described a more process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing than did Lucille Farnum:

> I'm not into writing. I guess writing stories is important. Any type of stories whether it's directly about something or a fantasy or it could be fact and fiction. Like about a specific subject that you're reading about....I think drafts are okay, but I think you should write it, be graded on it, and have an opportunity to correct it. Say how would you correct it. See what it is that you've done incorrectly and why you did it incorrectly..... [In addition to the teacher] other kids could [give feedback], even parents....Sometimes parents are afraid because they've learned it perhaps the old way...and the parents aren't used to doing it that way, but actually you're getting to the same result....I think it comes down to the final result because everybody's an individual and how they get to a certain point is different. But I think you should be able to give them input and options for what they have to do. Different approaches. And let them, each individual pick which way they want to go about it. And if at the end, it's not a good result, then you discuss with them personally how it could have changed. [In the evaluation] both [content and mechanics] should be considered equally....

The practices she cited for helping students understand books they had read were more interactive than the ones mentioned by Lucille Farnum although she also raised questions about including works by Shakespeare.

> Students should read all kinds [of books]. Classics, novels, fiction, non-fiction, biographies. Everything.... Never-ending--you can read about something and you're constantly learning things.... I think they should talk about it [in small groups] and even in the whole class.... I think Shakespeare's plays are ridiculous in the classroom because I think it's just not applicable to everyday life....I think they should be told about them and you know have some knowledge of them, but I don't think it should be a full-blown subject....[Performances, videos, acting scenes out] would be great, but to actually sit down and read it [Shakespeare], I don't think it has any meaning. If you're going to see a movie or a play or something like that.... I think that they understand it better....
>
> When you read something, you interpret it your own way. I think it's important for the teacher to say, to tell--what the general idea of it is, what the author was trying to put across, but how you interpret it is individual.

Judy Jones was typical of other parents with similar ratings in that she favored more student choice--in her case, students would choose one-half of the topics for writing and one-third of the books they read. Like others, she would allocate class time about evenly among students working in small groups, meeting as a whole class, and working individually.

Judy Jones' own words provide a good summary of the position on the continuum classified as *Teacher-Monitored Interactive Learning*:

> I don't think it's necessary for a teacher to stand up in front of the class for English because I think English is one of the subjects where you constantly have to keep things moving to keep them interested, and I don't think standing up in front of the class and having everybody watch you and listening to you keeps your attention. I just think the groups of kids and being able to express their ideas between each other is very important, but having the teacher there to kind of keep it together.

Placeholder 3 - Interactive Individualized Integrated Learning

[Y]ou can artistically and physically demonstrate your knowledge...[Kids should be given opportunities to learn from each other] because if the teacher has been teaching the class for many, many years, they may get a little--not stale but repetitious or whatever and kids can stimulate new ideas and discussion, avenues of discussion, and make it a whole new lesson.... – Pat Wilson

Pat Wilson was a single mother who worked full-time in customer service at a major local company. She had an A.A. degree from a college in Massachusetts where she also attended high school. She said her older daughter Martha, a junior, did very well in the arts and she played sports, but in January she received failing grades in everything except chorus. In contrast, her sister, Tanya, who attended Eastland Middle School, was "an excellent student." Martha's short term goal was to join "Up with People" [a performing group of young people] and, although she would like to be involved with the arts in some way, she probably would not attend "a traditional college." Her mother had already made arrangements for her to go to a private boarding school next year to repeat grade 11.

Pat Wilson also viewed learning as interactive process which led to greater understanding, but she and others with similar ratings tended to view knowledge more holistically than parents in the first two categories: they liked the idea of combining the study of history and English as American Studies. Pat Wilson said: "I think more classes should be combined--to see how they interrelate and I just think that they can get something out of seeing how the real world relates to the English. They can see why the particular writer wrote in that way because of the way things were going on at that time...."

Students would learn skills best in context. For example, Pat Wilson noted that at some point students need to learn "grammar, punctuation, the basic structure [because] it's a necessary skill, but I would hope by the high school level they'd have that type of skill under their belt and just reinforce it by saying, 'Please correct this.' [Do students learn best from doing exercises or correcting their own writing?] I think their own writing. They'd care more about it. And I think that they're going to learn more from their own writing rather than worksheets that everybody else has that they copy off a friend. [She laughed.]" Later she said: "Just reading increases your vocabulary, period."

Like other parents with similar ratings, Pat Wilson often talked about a particular practice as being favorable for one of her children but not the other because they have different needs and characteristics.

> When we did the PET [in grade 10], it indicated that the right brain or whatever, Martha definitely has the artistic and creative sides.... She has difficulty concentrating. She needs an individual presentation....[I asked about the photo of the teacher at the chalkboard.] No. She'd too easily tune out that way. [Shown photo of small group outdoors] This looks like it would be fun, but it looks to me like there'd be too many distractions. [Do you feel the same for Tanya?] No, they're totally different....Outdoors would work fine for Tanya.
>
> Now this program right here [She pointed to the photo of the student in front of the class.] I think that would work for both of them, and I know Tanya has done that in her social studies class. The teacher went to a conference recently and came back and had the kids teach the class. And Tanya thought that was fabulous....I'm not sure Martha would

> do that. Tanya is just a really dedicated student. But she just thought it was great. And the other thing is that they worked in teams. Three of them would work as a team to prepare the test and to prepare the lesson....Martha probably does well as far as the actual performance or presentation, but when it comes to the research, Martha's always the weak link....[A]n independent study or anything like that, that's totally out of the picture for Martha because she just doesn't have the self discipline. [For Tanya any of these things?] Yeah....

Pat Wilson's comments above also show another characteristic of parents' responses at this position on the continuum: they mentioned a greater variety of practices than parents in the first two categories. Learning for them was more holistic and process-centered. They believed that students could learn from each other. Students could give each other helpful feedback on drafts because surface features, such as punctuation and spelling, were less important than the expression and analysis of ideas. While most of the parents with lower ratings emphasized discussion, Pat Wilson, along others with higher ratings than Lucille Farnum and Judy Jones, suggested a number of other ways students could be helped to understand the books they read:

> I know for Martha what helps a lot is that when she had a World Humanities class in 10th grade--the kids did wonderful working with the arts in their history lesson--and actually they do them in Latin class, too. They do either fashion shows or cooking or--they made fabulous puppets, they put on puppet shows and performances together so they actually do something other than written. I don't think all of their work should be written because it shouldn't all rely on written presentation because you can artistically and physically demonstrate your knowledge.
>
> [Can kids learn from each other?] Yes. [Important to give them opportunity to do so?] Yes. Because if the teacher has been teaching the class for many, many years, they may get a little--not stale but repetitious or whatever and kids can stimulate new ideas and discussion, avenues of discussion, and make it a whole new lesson....

Pat Wilson and others with similar ratings favored letting students choose their own books, sometimes from within general categories, and their own topics for writing at least 50% of the time. They suggested that students spend at least 50% of their time in class working in small groups.

At this position on the continuum parents talked about learning as a social process, but they also said it was important to adapt curriculum and classroom practices for individual students' different needs and interests. Pat Wilson is representative of others who hold what can be characterized as *Interactive Individualized Integrated Learning*.

Placeholder 4 - Personalized Interdisciplinary Learning in Classroom and Community

[Ronnie's teachers] seem to understand more personally how he learns and [they] set up the independent study for him....I think that should go for every kid. – Randall Cromwell

Randall Cromwell, a former school administrator, was an executive director of a day nursery in a nearby city. Both he (M.Ed., C.A.S.) and his wife (B.A.), an artist, attended high school and college in Massachusetts. Ronnie, their youngest child, was in grade 11 and had attended the traditional elementary school in Eastland. His father described his achievement overall and in English as "excellent." A highly gifted and talented student, his son planned to pursue interests in art and writing at college.

Randall Cromwell's views place him in a position shared by no other parent interviewed. There are several factors which may help to explain his anchor position at the far end of the continuum. Not only had he had many years of experience as a professional educator, he was the only parent interviewed who held an advanced degree. Moreover, one of his older children, now in his 30's, had needed special services for many years, and three others, also in their 30's, were excellent or good students who went on to college and professional training. His youngest son had been allowed to pursue a completely independent study rather than attend the regular American Studies class. Until he was given this option, he was almost failing.

After explaining how his son benefited from teachers who "seem to understand more personally how he learns and set up the independent study" for him, he said: "I think that should go for every kid." He viewed learning as a process which ideally stretches beyond the classroom into the community. He explained that students could develop necessary skills and knowledge by working on projects, citing several examples: students in Alaska who actually marketed salmon, high school seniors who spent time in the day nursery [where he was the director] working with 2 1/2-year-olds, and his son who spent a week in the nursing home when he was in a middle school home economics class.

Within the boundaries of schools as they exist now, Randall Cromwell talked about the fact that teachers needed to give students more choices and to "create an interesting learning environment in the whole school." He favored interdisciplinary courses, such as American Studies and global studies, because "students can see the relationships between parts....sciences, math, shop, and whatever else can be transferred into their learning." All kids, he said, need "a multisensory approach" and, while they should be exposed to "different format," their creativity should not be "stifled." By giving young students worksheets with "fill in the blanks," teachers cause them to "function at a lower level" than they would if they were encouraged to build on the knowledge and skills they already have.

At the end of the interview when I asked if there was anything else he would like to add, he said:

> The only thing I can think of that would be helpful is if they could almost like run a summer school-type program during the year for the kids who are behind and the ones who are ahead. In summer school you go for six weeks and what they do is try to figure out where you're at and then

> take you as far as you can go. So that they can intensify what they do. Like a kid who's behind in social studies because he can't do the reading....Find the problem and fix it right away. Over the years I've observed kids in summer school making gains in 6 weeks they couldn't make in 36.

Randall Cromwell's view of learning can best be described as *Personalized Interdisciplinary Learning in Classroom and Community*. While the practices he cited were not so different in kind (extending the idea of projects beyond the classroom into the community, for example) from those of other parents with ratings above the mid-point, such as Pat Wilson, they were different in degree. These practices, however, were light years away from those of the few parents who clustered with Lucille Farnum at the other end of the continuum.

Impressions: The Portrait of Parents as a Group

These four placeholder profiles—Lucille Farnum, Judy Jones, Pat Wilson, and Randall Cromwell—illustrate the differences among parents with regard to the assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that underlie the practices parents cited as effective for a high school English class. This portrait of parents as a group, however, like an impressionistic painting, captures the essence of the beliefs landscape in broad brush strokes. The conceptions of learning held by the greatest number of parents can best be described as *Teacher-Monitored Interactive Learning* (40%) and *Interactive Individualized Integrated Learning* (40%).

Differences among parents could be seen more in the degree to which they believed certain curriculum or methods should be included or emphasized rather than in the kind of curriculum or practice. Randall Cromwell, often by himself, represented the least traditional view of learning on all aspects considered except grouping. [When pressed for an answer regarding heterogeneous vs. homogeneous grouping, he finally said, "I think if I were really altruistic, I would say, yeah, kids ought to be heterogeneously grouped and teachers ought to be trained to work with those kinds of issues...[but] ideally if I had it do all over again, I would insist Ronnie be with nothing but top kids."]

The greatest range of positions can be seen in the conceptualizations of knowledge as content or process. While the group leaned heavily towards the process end of the continuum, there was one parent, who talked about "absorbing" and memorizing," anchoring the other end. There was also somewhat less agreement about the degree to which control should be shared between teacher and students. Seven parents favored more teacher control than the others. Parents as a group clearly leaned more towards conceptualizing learning as a social rather than as an individual process; only three parents were positioned toward the individual end of the continuum. Likewise, the group viewed children as being more unique than similar; only two parents cited very few instances of the need to differentiate the curriculum for some students. This group of parents also characterized learning as being more holistic than molecular: only one parent was placed over on the molecular end of the continuum.

Summary: Major Observations

As a group, Eastland parents said that reading and writing should form the core of the high school English program. Students needed to develop knowledge and skills in these areas in order to get along in school and in the real world. Even the reason they most often cited for the third most important area of study, what some call "the basics," such as grammar, was a pragmatic one: grammar study will help students to better express themselves in speaking and writing.

These parents recognized, however, that the world was different than it was when they went to school. Thus, they thought that students would learn best if they were more active participants in the learning process than was the case in the highly-structured, teacher-dominated classrooms most of them remembered. Classrooms should look like classrooms, however, but the desks did not have to be in rows. Although many parents said there was no place for a couch in a classroom, most said that students could benefit from going outside occasionally as a break from the routine.

Parents were also very conscious of the need to motivate and interest students. Only occasionally did they say students should learn or do something they would not like, such as talking in front of the class. If a book or topic was necessary and might not be interesting to students, then teachers should find ways to deal with it so that students would be motivated to learn. Variety in classroom activities and some choice of books and writing topics were likely to help in this regard.

Although parents generally characterized the same practices as beneficial, they expressed some differences, especially with regard to the extent that certain curriculum should be included or emphasized, the amount of time students should be engaged in particular classroom activities, and/or the degree to which practices should be differentiated for particular groups (such as those planning to attend college) or individual students. Some parents, for example, said that while it would be good for college bound students to read Shakespeare, such content was not desirable for students who might work in a gas station after high school. The fact that parents' preferences appeared to differ more in degree than in kind held true even with the parent whose views were most divergent. The ideal learning environment for him was one which would be personally designed for each individual student rather than for certain groups of students and would enable students to learn through interdisciplinary projects not only in the classroom but also in the community.

DISCUSSION

What can educators learn from this study which might be useful as they engage in the process of restructuring the classroom? These results suggest that Sizer (1992) is right: some parents perhaps do need "to think differently about their children's learning" (4), but parents as a group may not be as formidable a barrier to change for the reasons educators may think.

For the most part, these parents were not, as Wilhite (1973) describes the parents in his study, "unaware of curriculum matters and out of touch with much of school life" (229). Their responses showed that most of them knew a great deal about their children's present English class. They talked about specific activities and assignments their children had done. Most knew that the class was

heterogeneously grouped and that English was taught along with history in a two-period interdisciplinary course called American Studies—although at least one parent who was very opposed to American Studies seemed clearly confused about both interdisciplinary and team teaching aspects of this course. Other parents were critical not of the course itself but of the amount and difficulty of the work assigned to students.

There was a surprising amount of similarity in these parents' explanations of preferred practices and in the underlying assumptions about teaching and learning on which the preferred practices were based. In contrast to the findings in other studies (Wilhite 1973; Philibert and Hoge 1982; Stevens et al. 1983; Gilbert and Reid 1972; Johnson and Immerwahr 1994), most of these parents preferred more interactive and varied practices than were the norm in the highly-structured teacher-controlled classrooms most remembered from their own days in school. They valued an education that was both personal and pragmatic, and they believed the best practices for accomplishing this goal in a high school English class would be those that actively engaged students in learning in ways that would help them see connections between what they were learning and their own lives and prepare them for the future.

Unlike several other studies (Lightfoot 1978; Johnson and Ransom 1983; Anyon 1980) which indicate that the more progressive practices are likely to be favored by well-educated middle-class parents and opposed by less-educated working-class parents, that did not seem to be the case with parents in this study. There appeared to be no relationship between parents' preferences for or opposition to specific practices and their educational or socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, one woman, who was herself a high school dropout, was critical of traditional practices because she had seen how cooperative learning and individualized curriculum options—not a possibility when she was in school—had greatly benefited her daughter who was a special education student.

The factors which did seem to be associated with more progressive teaching practices included the following: 1) the degree to which parents perceived students as having universal or particular characteristics, 2) the amount of knowledge they possessed about different practices, and 3) the dominant time perspective they adopted in their interviews. Those parents who talked about particular groups, such as college bound students or individual students with different learning styles, tended to cite a greater variety or preferred practices and to explain them in more detail than others. Parents' knowledge of different practices often came from their own experience or the fact that they had two children who were very different or one child for whom traditional methods had not worked. These parents were also likely to focus on the here and now rather than the future: they discussed the learning process itself more than other parents. The latter group seemed most concerned about the intended outcome of that process. Even though they used the same criteria to evaluate practices, some parents were more likely than others to differentiate curriculum or methods for particular groups or individual students, to cite a greater variety of preferred practices, and to describe these practices in greater detail than other parents did—and, in most cases, these parents were the ones whose assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning tended to more progressive than traditional.

One way to explain why the assumptions of Eastland parents as a group were not as traditional as previous studies might suggest or educators might think is that most parents in this study had had previous opportunities to become familiar with innovative practices even though they had not yet been directly involved in the change process at Eastland High School. A majority of their children had attended elementary and middle schools in Eastland. Since the early 1970s, progressive classroom practices had been the basis of one program option for elementary students; in recent years many innovative practices had also been incorporated in varying degrees in the three elementary program options available to students. Since the early 1980s the program at Eastland Middle School had included such features as heterogeneous grouping, team teaching, and interdisciplinary study. Thus, parents had been able to see how some innovative practices might benefit students. Because they, like parents generally, tended to be much more involved with their children's schools in the lower grades, some had even visited their children's classrooms and seen firsthand how these practices worked.

Another way to explain why this group of parents responded differently than one might expect is that this study attempted to look at some aspects of parents' beliefs about teaching and learning rather than considering only their opinions about classroom practices. Preferences comprised only one element of *beliefs* as it was defined for this study. When the other two components--explanations and assumptions--were added to the mix, a very different picture of parents' views emerged. Although these parents did disagree about specific practices, their explanations revealed that they used similar criteria for evaluating practices and that many shared a belief in similar general principles about teaching and learning. As Leichter (1979) suggests, buried within an apparent conflict, there may be points of agreement: "the same set of ideas may be seen as having similarities" (30). Thus, despite the fact that these parents held differing opinions about a particular practice, such as the form class discussion should take, for example, they shared the view that students should be engaged as more active participants in learning than would be the case in a traditional classroom in which students are forced to be more passive.

It is important to note that results in another community, larger and more diverse than Eastland, might be quite different. But one point seems clear: parents' perspectives cannot be fully understood from surveys alone. When parents explain the reasons for their preferences of opposition to certain practices, researchers are likely to find there are many complex and idiosyncratic reasons for parents' responses. Parents who are critical of or even oppose a practice, such as cooperative learning, or a program, such as an interdisciplinary course, may at the same time indicate in other ways that they support the assumptions about teaching and learning which underlie the practices they criticize.

Some Eastland parents opposed a practice that supported a general principle of learning and teaching in which they believed because the practice was problematical for other reasons. For example, one parent, who at first said she did not like the idea of small groups at all because her daughter had unfairly received a low grade when other students had failed to do their share, later acknowledged that students could learn from each other and the small group was one good way of doing this—if the

problem of fairness could be solved. American Studies provides another example of this point. Some parents were very critical of the requirements of the course and others were clearly confused about what was happening in the American Studies. Because no parent had ever experienced this practice, they seemed to be relying on their children's present experience in the present class for their knowledge of it, and, as Young and McGeeney (1968) point out, children can be "unreliable informants." Some of these parents indicated that they saw the value of interdisciplinary learning, saying, for example, that the literature students read could be enhanced by also studying history simultaneously. Some favored other practices in which learning was integrated and contextual, such as students' learning punctuation rules by correcting errors in their own writing rather than doing worksheet exercises or learning vocabulary from the books they read instead of from teacher-made lists. Yet they expressed opposition to the American Studies class because they were confused about how the course was taught or critical of its demanding requirements.

Other parents seemed to oppose some practices because they did not understand how they would help their children develop the knowledge and skills they would need in the future. For example, all parents wanted children to learn to write effectively and correctly, but some of them did not see any way students would develop these skills by working together in small groups even though they said a small-group discussion was a good way for students to develop a better understanding of a book they had read. Because these parents appeared to have little knowledge or conceptual understanding of the process approach to teaching writing, they did not think this practice would lead to the outcome they desired. At other times during the interview, though, they cited other practices as effective, saying that students could learn from each other. Perhaps their opposition in this instance, then, was the result of their lack of knowledge about the practice and not because there was a contradiction between the practice and their underlying assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning.

Finally, this study indicates that conversation with parents in a non-threatening environment is not only valuable as a means of discovering what parents actually think about certain practices, but such conversations may also encourage some parents to develop new understandings about teaching and learning. As parents talked, they revealed more about their beliefs than one would get from survey data alone, and, as I indicated earlier, parents sometimes opposed practices that seemed to mesh well with other evidence of their underlying assumptions about teaching and learning. Without asking parents to explain their responses, one might misinterpret them or fail to see that disagreement about practices may be superficial. Thus, conversations with parents may be the only way educators can begin to know what parents really think.

IMPLICATIONS

Among the implications of this study, three points seem especially important for educators to consider as they engage in efforts to restructure the high school classroom. First, educators need to talk with parents to find out what they actually think. Second, educators should go beyond discussing outcomes on which there is likely to be less disagreement and engage parents in dialogue about the

process(es) that would be used to reach the outcomes. Third, educators might have a better chance of winning parents' understanding of and upport for innovative practices by giving them opportunities to learn about practices they have not experienced and do not know about.

1. Educators should talk to parents to find out what they think, misunderstand, or need to know.

One of the most important implications of this study is that educators need to talk to parents to find out what they actually think and what they misunderstand or need to know. Educators should look beyond parents' initial comments or criticism to find the basis for their opposition because buried within may be the key to resolving the conflict. This study revealed that parents' responses are often too complex and idiosyncratic to be accurately assessed quantitatively. Thus, results from survey data may be misleading or incomplete.

If surveys are used to collect data, educators should also consider gathering some more in-depth personal responses to survey questions by interviewing some participants in their homes. [Students might gain some hands-on experience and relevant learning by helping educators in this regard.] While phone interviews would provide more information than printed forms, parents are likely to be most comfortable and open about sharing their views if they can do so on their turf. This point may be especially important with regard to those parents whose past involvement with the school has usually been the result of their children's school problems.

2. Discussions with parents about outcomes may be positive, but dialogue about process(es) may be more productive in the long run.

Because there seems to be general agreement among parents about the intended outcomes of the learning process, educators who wish to avoid conflict can involve parents in discussions, such as the "visioning sessions" currently being conducted with parents and community members in many school districts. However, this strategy may not uncover potential areas of disagreement about the process needed to reach these outcomes. Because, as this study revealed, parents are not likely to disagree about outcomes, such an activity is likely to give everyone a sense that they have a shared vision.

These visioning sessions, however, may be counterproductive. First, a focus on outcomes may mask or avoid dealing with the conflicting views that would be apparent if parents were allowed to discuss particular issues, such as specific practices (heterogeneous grouping or interdisciplinary courses) involving their own children. The parents in this study, for example, all agreed that students should be active participants in the learning process. They did not all agree, however, that small-group discussions would be the best way of engaging students. If parents are not also given an opportunity to discuss the ways outcomes might be reached, then educators may assume there is more common agreement than might actually be the case.

Second, and perhaps more important, the responses of parents in this study indicated that those parents who seemed more willing than others to consider the value of non-traditional practices talked more about the learning process than its intended outcomes. Other parents—the ones who expressed their views with the most certainty and most often preferred a very traditional approach to teaching and

learning—tended to emphasize outcomes and ignore process. Parents in this latter group were the ones who were least likely to support innovative practices because they did not seem to understand how a non-traditional approach would lead to the outcomes they desired. By keeping parents focused only on outcomes, educators may in fact prevent them from developing the new understandings about teaching and learning which might lead them to support the changes educators want to make.

3. Educators should provide more opportunities for parents to learn more about unfamiliar classroom practices

Educators may have a better chance of helping parents understand innovative practices if they give them opportunities to learn about them. Rather than attempting to avoid conflict by looking only at outcomes, educators may be able to manage or prevent conflict by thinking of parents as potential learners. Lightfoot, for instance, even points out that "conflict is potentially constructive...[in] resolving differences" (189). Many parents who are critical of current practices may need only to see how unfamiliar processes can lead to the intended outcomes they desire. Educators may be able to help these parents develop some new understandings about teaching and learning by engaging them in activities in which they will learn about practices different from those they have experienced.

By focusing parents' attention on the process of learning in relation to its intended outcomes, educators may be able to help parents understand how process and intended outcome can be viewed as two integrated aspects of the same conceptual entity. Parents in this study favored those practices that they thought would enable their children to develop the skills and knowledge they believed children needed to succeed in school and prepare them for the future. They opposed those which appeared to hinder their children in this regard. Parents' emphasis on product rather than process in the teaching of writing is one good example of this problem. If educators can help them see how the process of engaging in a new classroom practice will eventually lead students to a desired outcome, they will be likely to support it.

Just as many educators now believe that students must be active participants if they are to learn, parents must be actively involved and engaged. Parents are unlikely to learn new ways of thinking about teaching and learning if their knowledge is limited to what they read in newsletters and other written communications from the school. When parents get letters or notices riddled with jargon, they are likely be frustrated or further confused rather than informed. The ritualistic contacts Lightfoot (1978) discusses, such as PTA meetings and parent conferences, are also not likely to help parents learn unless they are organized and run in a very different way. For example, many schools have begun to make parent conferences more meaningful by having students present and explain their portfolios. Another way educators can involve parents in learning is to invite them to discuss new practices *before* they are implemented. Educators might consider adopting the focus group model which business and industry depend on for consumer feedback. When changes, such as the introduction of an interdisciplinary course are contemplated, educators could bring together a representative group of parents to explore the concept. Through their discussions, parents might begin to understand the potential benefits of practices

which were unfamiliar to them. If, as Young and McGeeney (1968) argue, most parents get their information about what students are doing in school from their own children, then teachers are in a position to increase the chances that parents will get "good" information by making sure their students know what they are doing and why.

Parents, like teachers, need to develop their own meanings of change (Fullan 1991). If teachers, parents, and students can do this together, the group has an opportunity "to achieve shared meanings" (209).

CONCLUSION

Because people's behavior is determined by their beliefs, studies which attempt to discover what people believe are important but difficult to conduct. First, even constructing an operational definition of *beliefs* is problematic because of the open-endedness of beliefs. Second, because beliefs are not completely open to inspection even by the person holding them, the researcher can only get at a very small part of anyone's beliefs and must do so indirectly. Then one faces the challenge of making some sense from the mass of data revealed by participants. The comments of the parents in this study and the personal stori s they told--often complex and idiosyncratic and sometimes contradictory--suggested something about their attitudes, values, and assumptions, but, as Rokeach (1960, 1968) indicates, these are only some of the elements of beliefs or beliefs systems. Despite all of these problems, however, this research is important. Parents' views on teaching and learning can easily be misunderstood if there is no attempt to get beyond their initial responses. Parents' preferences or opposition to specific practices have been constructed in many different ways; we need to know more about the different ways parents construct their own meanings about classroom practices.

If, as previous researchers and theorists (Fullan 1982, 1991; Senge 1989; Connelly and Clandinin 1988; Sergiovanni 1987; Berlak and Berlak 1981) have argued, people's decisions and actions cannot be understood without some knowledge of the often unarticulated assumptions and beliefs from which they come, then educators cannot expect to find effective ways to win parents' support for innovative practices without knowing more about their present beliefs. Yet, educators know very little about the educational beliefs of parents, especially those of high school students, since the number of previous studies is so small. Thus, further research is needed, especially in larger communities more culturally and socio-economically diverse than the community in this study. Because educational beliefs is an area in which relatively few studies have been conducted and because parents, unlike teachers, cannot easily (if at all) be observed "in action," parents' beliefs—the components and ways to investigate them—also deserve further study.

Although there is a great deal of rhetoric about the importance of involving parents in efforts to effect change in schools, the reality is that most parents have not been active participants in the process. Fullan (1991) argues that parent involvement represents "one of the most powerful and underutilized instruments for educational reform" (246); it should be a "fundamental part of the definition and mission of an effective schools...not an add-on" (249). And, as the authors of the Public Agenda report warn,

educators must not ignore the public's views by dismissing them out of hand or merely paying lip service to their ideas:

> The public's concerns are fundamental. Many of the public's views—the focus on order and basics, the discomfort with teaching innovations—have been around for a while. And at their very core, these are people's real concerns about the future of children they love....
>
> ....Schools will not change because leaders want them to. They will change when parents, students, and teachers go about their daily activities in different ways. That will only happen when the public is considered an equal and respected partner in reform—one whose views are worth listening to. (Johnson and Immerwahr 1994, 39)

As educators engage in efforts to restructure the classroom, they are likely to be more successful if they view parents not as a necessary evil but as potentially powerful partners in the community of learners.

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*The larger study on which this paper is based is reported in Dodd, Anne Wescott. 1994. "Parents as Partners in Learning: Their Beliefs about Effective Practices for Teaching and Learning High School English." Ed.D. dissertation. University of Maine.